

Creating a Suburban Escape: Class, Race, and Gender in Post-World War II Levittown

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by

Lexi Gribble

Thesis Advisor

Dr. James Connolly

Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana

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Abstract

Most Americans now live in suburban places. While suburbs are common throughout the country today, they were not always prevalent. They developed slowly before experiencing a major boom following the end of the Second World War. Factors such as economic growth, housing shortages, and federal programs helped developers create suburbs across the country. One particular developer, Levitt and Sons, profited greatly off of the demand for housing by creating suburbs that not only provided people with a place to live, but with a middle-class way of life. Suburban developers such as the Levitts created a distinct set of expectations for the residents of their communities. They showcased these ideals in their advertisements. This paper will explore how advertisements sold the Levittown life, and how class, race, and gender were major factors in the marketing of suburbs. By setting certain expectations around class, race, and gender, Levittown set itself apart as the suburb idolized during the postwar period.

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Process Analysis Essay

This semester, I was challenged with writing a paper much longer and more thorough than I have in the past. While this allowed me to explore my topic at a deeper level, it also pushed me to closely examine my argument and include details that went above and beyond other writing assignments. The research included both primary and secondary sources, which meant I was working through not only sources from the time period, but also sources that contained bias and arguments of their own. Using both types of sources in my research allowed me to discuss the development of suburbs during the postwar era, and then support my arguments with primary source evidence. I learned how to combine the two types of sources to craft an organized exploration of my topic.

I discovered throughout this process that there is an overabundance of information available today, either through the Internet or print materials. The main challenge I faced was selecting proper information for reaching my goal. While certain information pertained to the topic, it was not always pertinent to the argument being made in the research, and so the writing and revision process was also an examination of why or why not information should be included.

This project was an opportunity for me to examine the post-World War II era in the United States, which I am interested in, and explore its significance in the growth and development of the country. This thesis is important because it comments on a period of American history that has had a lasting impact to the present day. The development of suburbs in the United States changed housing and settlement trends, and the expectations of suburban life helped to shape modern American life. This project provided me with various opportunities to develop my skills as a writer and historian, and challenged me to examine various topics that could help readers picture what suburban life was like in post-World War II Levittown.

Creating a Suburban Escape: Class, Race, and Gender in Post-World War II Levittown

As World War II came to a close and the country reoriented to peacetime, the housing market went through a major boom. The war and earlier depression left the country without the needed housing to support its growing postwar population. As marriage and birth rates rose during and after the war, suburban developments not only became the answer to the housing problem, but also the idealized standard of living. With the growth of the suburbs, the standards of suburban family life started to develop in the minds of Americans.¹ Across the country, developers responded to this need for housing, and many marketed their homes to former military men and their families. One of the most influential developers during this period was Levitt and Sons, who responded to the need for housing by creating Levittowns. These communities helped to shape the suburban dream of the era.

Levittown started as one development in Long Island, New York, but later expanded to other developments in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Maryland. Levittowns were originally built with support from the federal government in response to the major housing shortages following World War II. The country needed homes, and the Levitt family could fulfill this need, as they knew how to produce houses quickly and efficiently.² Their success subsequently drove them to expand their developments, which shifted their focus to creating perfect communities built with white, middle-class families in mind. The sons Alfred and William primarily ran the

¹ Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 232.

² *Ibid.*, 234.

company, and their business plans included selling a particular way of life for people buying Levittown homes.³

The life the Levitts sold through advertisements shows the attempt of postwar developers to provide people with an escape from the cultural and political issues of the time. The suburbs could provide a place of refuge where residents could live in a community with clear expectations and parameters. Due to its role in suburbanization, Levittown could be considered the most famous example from the postwar period of the larger suburban trends at the time. The suburban life that Levittown and its advertisements sold to potential homebuyers in the post-World War II era is indicative of the larger suburban culture of the time period because the idealized, homogenized vision of suburbia endorsed by the Levitts promoted a sense of safety during a period of change and turmoil. That vision in turn limited the ability of certain people to partake in suburban life depending on their class, race, or gender.

Levittown shaped the newly developing housing market of the postwar period, and promoted the idea that their customers belonged to a specific social group, which they helped to create. Levittown was looking to attract veteran families who did not have a lot of money, but could use federal support to buy into suburban life.⁴ Those customers were then immediately exposed to particular beliefs and behaviors that would shape their lives. When examining life in Levittowns, it is clear that class, race, and gender played crucial and interconnected roles in the makeup of the communities during the postwar period.

First, suburbs such as Levittown were built with class in mind. The middle class developed over time and throughout the centuries was associated with different characteristics

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 235.

and ways of life. During the postwar period, the middle class grew in prominence, and helped to set the ideal standard of living in the United States. As a result of appropriate pricing and advertising, Levittown appealed to many Americans. These particular suburbs were also seen as an escape for the middle class.⁵ Most prominently, military families, who were looking for a place to live and grow, could find affordable housing in Levittowns. This appeal to military families helped Levittowns grow, and the Levittowns were crucial to the suburb's role in developing the postwar middle class.

Second, Levittown sold suburban life based not only on class, but also on race. From the beginning, the Levitts only sold their homes to white people due to racism. When African Americans attempted to buy homes in Levittown developments, they faced intense resistance and were told it was impossible.⁶ Levittown advertisements also did not include any representation of African Americans, which reflected the reality that they were not welcome as potential buyers. This policy not only resulted in segregated suburbs in both the North and the South, but also helped in the development of black communities and suburbs. These separate spaces provided African Americans with the suburban life they desired, but in a community of people who understood their culture and way of life.⁷

Lastly, Levittown not only appealed to middle-class families, but also specifically to women. Women in the suburbs were expected to be ideal housewives, as displayed in many advertisements of the time. Women and the home became synonymous, and there were just as

⁵ William M. Dobriner, *Class in Suburbia* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall INC., 1963), 85.

⁶ David Kushner, *Levittown: Two Families, One Tycoon, and the Fight for Civil Rights in America's Legendary Suburb* (New York: Walker & Company, 2009), 17.

⁷ Andrew Wiese, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 68.

many expectations based on gender roles in Levittown as there were for people due to class or race. In reality though, many suburban women worked and earned money for their family alongside the men. This growth of women in the workforce would happen slowly, and it shows the reality of the postwar economy and society.⁸ Class, race, and gender each had an influential role in the development of the suburban ideal for the period.

Admiration for suburban life was not new in the United States. Rather, the attraction of postwar suburbs was built on the already present desire to escape the problems of the city for a quieter, safer life. During the nineteenth century, America experienced a transportation revolution, which changed the patterns of city and suburb interaction. According to Kenneth Jackson, "Essentially, it [suburban expansion] demonstrates that enormous growth to metropolitan size was accompanied by rapid population growth on the periphery, by leveling of the density curve, by an absolute loss of population at the center, and by an increase in the average journey to work, as well as by a rise in socioeconomic status of suburban residents."⁹ Beginning during the nineteenth century, the United States started to romanticize suburbs over city life. With the development of the suburbs came the celebration of picturesque suburban life. As early as the 1850s, people started to plan suburban communities as units, which blended with the natural landscape.¹⁰ As the country continued to grow, so did the desire to live in these perfect communities.

The suburban trends that began in the nineteenth century only continued to grow stronger during the twentieth. The massive growth of the suburbs following World War II was not only a

⁸ Marilyn Rubin, "Debunking the Myth: Working Women in Suburbia," *New York Affairs* 5, no. 4 (1979): 79.

⁹ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*, 20.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 73.

response to the need for housing, but also to provide middle-class Americans with a sense of security and safety. According to Robert Beauregard, “During the depths of the postwar urban crisis, commentators were fond of pointing out how much Americans disliked and even hated the cities. They not only noted the flight to the suburbs but also admitted into evidence polling data that found that numerous city residents would prefer to avoid the city’s congestion, noise, crime, and high prices.”¹¹ People could leave city life behind and become homeowners, and for companies such as Levitt and Sons, this provided an opportunity to create suburban escapes with specific expectations and limitations.

The Creation of Levittown

While the company Levitt and Sons started out as a business contracted to build defense housing, it quickly became the most recognizable name associated with American suburbanization. Originally run by Abraham Levitt, the business passed on to his two sons, Alfred and William when Abraham entered semiretirement. Each son played a crucial role in the design and growth of the Levitt brand. Alfred was the designer, who helped to create the iconic Levittown home designs. Abe, while in semiretirement, became obsessed with the landscaping and exterior of the houses.¹² William, who also went by Bill, was their front man in charge of selling the idea of Levittown to buyers. According to David Kushner, Bill was a “lifelong playboy with a keen sense of panache and story, [Bill] knew he wasn’t just selling brick and mortar – he was selling a dream.”¹³ Their work building defense housing inspired the family run

¹¹ Robert A. Beauregard, *When America Became Suburban* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2006), 72.

¹² Kushner, *Levittown: Two Families, One Tycoon, and the Fight for Civil Rights in America's Legendary Suburb*, 9.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 10.

company to make a profit off the streamlined building process they had adopted.¹⁴ This idea quickly developed into a project that started with the massive purchase of hundreds of acres of potato fields on Long Island. Kushner argues that with this purchase, “the Levitts hatched their ambitious plan: to mass-produce the American dream for the common people, the veterans coming home from the war. They would build a town.”¹⁵ This idea not only produced the iconic Levittown in Long Island, New York, but would push the company expand its ideal American town to other locations around the United States, and would later inspire other developers to copy their work.

Their postwar project, which began on the potato fields in Long Island, utilized the large-scale development that they started when building residences for the U.S. Navy in Virginia. The Levitts began their developments with two basic housing units, the Cape Cod-style and Ranch-style homes, which they could produce both efficiently and uniformly.¹⁶ This picturesque and predictable life was not only easy for the Levitts to produce, but easy to market. The residents poured in, and “Sites for schools and ‘village green’ shopping centers, as well as land for parks and public swimming pools were donated by the builders to the community, marketing features that ensured this suburb’s population growth to more than 80,000 in a few years, not to mention to Levitt and Sons financial success.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Curtis Miner, "Picture Window Paradise: Welcome to Levittown," *Pennsylvania Heritage* 28, no. 2 (June 2002): 13.

¹⁵ Kushner, *Levittown: Two Families, One Tycoon, and the Fight for Civil Rights in America's Legendary Suburb*, 37.

¹⁶ Norbert Schoenauer, *Cities, Suburbs, Dwellings in the Postwar Era* (Montreal: McGill University, 1994), 29.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

With the development and success of the Long Island Levittown, the Levitt brothers looked to expand on their business. They determined that they would build another Levittown, this time in Pennsylvania. In 1951, the company purchased broccoli and spinach fields in Bucks County, Pennsylvania.¹⁸ The brothers knew this project was more ambitious. As Kushner explains, "While the first Levittown had a degree of organization, it was still by the family's own admission, a seat-of-the-pants project. But the new community would be different; in Pennsylvania, it was all about the master plan."¹⁹ The master plan was to create a perfect suburban community, and the Levitts worked hard to achieve this specific goal.

Unlike the previous development in Long Island, this Levittown had to be completely built from scratch. This was an exciting challenge for the Levitts, especially Alfred, who had the opportunity to design every aspect of the perfect community. The Levitts recognized that they would have to build "roads, the sewer and water systems, the homes, and community."²⁰ They set out to create what would today be considered the quintessential American suburb. Every neighborhood was planned in one-mile-square units, with three to five hundred homes in each. The neighborhoods were given idyllic names and the street names would start with the same letter as the neighborhood's name. Buyers had a small selection of housing styles to choose from, and each home came complete with appliances and storage, which were big selling points to a prospective suburban family.²¹ Even the outside of the houses was planned precisely, thanks

¹⁸ Kushner, *Levittown: Two Families, One Tycoon, and the Fight for Civil Rights in America's Legendary Suburb*, 59.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 59-60.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 60-61.

to the contribution of the elder Levitt, Abe. According to Kushner, Abe “insisted that each plot would have a lawn, over a dozen trees, and more than three dozen shrubs and bushes.”²²

The planning of the perfect suburb did not stop at the housing. The Levitts also built “Little league fields, Olympic-size swimming pools, and an enormous shopping plaza that would be the biggest east of the Mississippi.”²³ Levitt and Sons were not just building suburbs, but creating a life separate from the central city in a community where everyone shared the same level of social status. To attract people to their community, the Levitts worked hard to sell their improved way of suburban life. They advertised the idea that this new Levittown was “the most perfectly planned community in America!”²⁴ They opened their showroom to the public and people lined up outside to jump on the opportunity to live in this new community. Their advertisements helped not only to set up Levittown as the example of selling the suburban ideal to the American public, but they also showed how hard the Levitts worked to establish certain expectations when it came to becoming a resident of Levittown.²⁵

The Levitts, and especially Bill, knew that to provide buyers with the lifestyle that they did not know they needed, it had to be sold to them. For Bill, selling the suburban dream was about telling a story, and “The story played out not on the silver screen, but in his flamboyant newspaper ads.”²⁶ The Levittown sales pitch focused on providing a better life for its residents, which included all the amenities and safety desired by Americans following World War II. The

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 61.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 10-11.

ads that sold the Levittown life not only provide insight into the time period, but also explain what Levitt and Sons expected of the people who would buy into the suburban ideal they worked hard to sell.

When examining the success of the suburban boom during the post-World War II period, it is also important to consider the impact of advertisements. They were a way for people and companies to sell their products, or in this case lifestyle, to potential buyers. Through their message and imagery, advertisements showed people how they could live their lives. This then allowed companies to profit off the desirable lives that they created. Advertisers knew exactly what to sell consumers as the war ended because people were searching for a sense of stability. Advertisements started to sell this idea of a “world of tomorrow,” which provided consumers with a sense of hope for life following the war. People needed to be told there was a great life in the future so they would buy into the ideal American life once the country was at peace. Even before the end of the war, “Social evolution as scripted in ‘world of tomorrow’ narratives involved the freedom to make consumer purchases and the liberty to acquire a white middle-class standard of living.”²⁷ Levittown advertisements tried to attract a certain type of homebuyer, and there are numerous examples of how class, race, and gender played a role in advertisements and the development of the ideal Levittown resident.

Class

In the United States, the middle class has gone through many different stages of development. These stages each have their own characteristics specific to the time period, but several factors during the postwar period, such as an economic boom and population growth, helped the middle class thrive. Levittown represented middle-class desires, and used them to

²⁷ Cynthia L. Henthorn, *From Submarines to Suburbs: Selling a Better America, 1939-1959* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006), 152.

attract veterans and their families to its developments. As families moved into their homes, they were quickly exposed to the middle-class expectations perpetuated in Levittown. Middle class and suburb became synonymous during this period due to the major influence Levittown had on the development of the middle class. People who lived in Levittown learned quickly to adhere to the lifestyle of the class they were buying into.

During the nineteenth century, the United States saw the growth of what William Dobriner calls the “old middle class.” Dobriner defines the “old middle class” as people who were “small and independent owners – the little manufacturer, the small retailer, the independent professional, the small businessman.”²⁸ They worked hard to obtain the status of middle-class, and strived to emulate the lifestyles of the wealthy. The “old middle class” was made up of innovators who made their money by running their own businesses or providing necessities for their community. The reality for the “old middle class” was that, “eight out of ten people owned the land and property from which they made a living.”²⁹ The “old middle class” lasted through the Civil War, but as economic development and industrialization changed the face of the United States, so did the attitudes and behaviors of the middle class.

Following the Civil War, the “new middle class” developed to replace the “old middle class.” According to Dobriner, “From 1870 to 1940, the new middle class grew three times faster than the working class, eight times faster than the number of enterprisers (old middle class), and two-and-a-half times faster than the middle class as a whole.”³⁰ The middle class of the post-

²⁸ William M. Dobriner, *Class in Suburbia* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall INC., 1963), 39.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 40.

Civil War period differed from the middle class that came before in one distinctive way.

Dobriner claims, "The new middle classes do not derive a living by working their own property and following out their own economic institutions...Instead they are the ready followers of a tradition already shaped for them."³¹ Unlike the "old middle class," this group was made up of people who worked as a part of a larger company. They did not create wealth for themselves; rather they "serve the corporation, feed its institutions, and follow its star."³² This group did not represent company owners or CEO's, but rather the people who worked for the leaders and made daily operations run smoothly. The middle class would "teach the classes, type the letters, wear the white collars. Many eventually move to the suburbs."³³

Several factors were essential to the growth of the middle class during the postwar period. The end of the war brought a major economic boom to the country, and there was a reorientation from the production of military goods to consumer goods, which people were ready to buy after years of deprivation. With the return of men from war, the country also experienced a major marriage boom and baby boom, which created a housing shortage. In fact, "this rise of family formation coupled with the decline in housing starts meant that there were virtually no homes for sale or apartments for rent at war's end."³⁴ To help facilitate the growth of the middle class and to respond to the need for housing, the federal government started various programs to kick start housing development. The government established "the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944, which created a Veterans Administration mortgage program similar to that of

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 41.

³⁴ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*, 232.

FHA.”³⁵ This helped veterans and their families buy a home in one of the many communities that developers were erecting around the country. The Veterans Administration would also help servicemen return to civilian life, and would provide them with the services and education to make that possible. These factors all aided the middle class’s expansion in the postwar period, and Levittown was there to respond to the major housing needs of the country.

Levittown quickly became the suburb to represent the desires and expectations of the middle class. With a government contract, the Levitts built their suburbs with veterans in mind. The first Levittown was even initially limited to veterans, who were entering the middle class because of programs such as the G.I. Bill and the Federal Housing Administration.³⁶ The result of the push for veterans to live in the suburbs was it helped establish former military men as the backbone of the postwar middle class. Men returned to civilian life using the G.I. Bill, and the desire to own a home with a yard for the family seemed to be a hallmark of the middle class that endured since the nineteenth century. In Levittown during the early years after the war, it was clear what type of people were considered the ideal residents. The young veterans with their wives and children came to Levittown ready for the life that the Levitts were advertising. In the suburbs, they could leave the city behind for a new life.³⁷ Levittown took city families driven to the suburbs for cheap housing and would mold them into middle-class Americans.

Families that moved into Levittown were immediately exposed to the expectations of middle-class life. While the Levitts created several basic home designs to help speed up production, the uniformity of Levittown reinforced ideas that being middle class meant adhering

³⁵Ibid., 233.

³⁶ Ibid., 235.

³⁷ Ibid., 100.

to certain lifestyles and behaviors. As Barbara Kelly has suggested, "The single-family houses on separate plots reinforced the American myth of rugged individualism without encouraging nonconformity."³⁸ Even the distribution and layout of space reinforced middle-class ideals, such as the desire for a single-family home with its own yard. This desire harkens back to the early days of American suburbs, where promoters romanticized homes with yards.³⁹ The homes that the G.I. bill financed helped to promote a form of domesticity. With this domesticity, Kelly notes that, "the privatization of the family through the individualization of their dwelling served to keep the nuclear family intact."⁴⁰ Suburban homes brought families together, and were an influential force shaping the characteristics of the middle class during the postwar period.

Levittown was a special type of suburb. It represented and catered to a specific type of middle-class life that was not the reality for all suburbs across the country. Other suburbs were not as focused on catering to the idea of the planned community, and the Levitt brothers worked hard to make sure Levittown helped to establish the middle-class norms and ideals of the period. Creating generalizations about suburbs based on Levittown distorts our understanding of actual suburban life. According to Scott Donaldson, if there is any hope of seeing class and suburbia for what it truly is, "the idea that there is only one kind of suburb must be discarded."⁴¹ The Levitts

³⁸ Barbara M. Kelly, *Expanding the American Dream: Building and Rebuilding Levittown*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 63.

³⁹ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*, 73.

⁴⁰ Kelly, *Expanding the American Dream: Building and Rebuilding Levittown*, 70.

⁴¹ Scott Donaldson, *The Suburban Myth*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 46.

understood their communities, and how they could help not only to shape the suburban ideal that would create the middle class, but also shape suburban life for the country.

During this period American society connected the middle class with the ideas of “homeownership” and a “respectable standard of living.”⁴² Postwar Levitt and Sons developments supported the idea that being “American” was synonymous with being middle class. The mass media even characterized Levittowns as an expression of “middle-class society.”⁴³ The growth of suburbs not only helped the idea of the middle class grow, but boosted the idea of creating a perfect suburban community as well. “References to ‘suburbia’ more often than not cite the examples of Park Forest and Levittown,” as Bennett Berger points out, “as if these two communities could represent a nationwide phenomenon that has occurred at all but the very lowest income levels and among most occupational classifications.”⁴⁴ Levittown represented a specific type of suburban life, and was used to classify the specific type of suburbanite it created. Levittown was not looking to attract the very rich or poor, but catered to the middle-class family that was idealized following the war.

Levittown used many advertisements to sell their homes, and many of them depicted aspects of the middle class lifestyle. There were two ways that Levittown advertisements sold the idea of a middle class life to Americans. One way was by focusing on the home, appealing to the availability of suburban homes for veterans who did not have a lot of money and were utilizing government programs. Another was emphasizing the family, and marketing directly to “Mr. and Mrs. Homebuyer.” These two different styles of advertisement show how Levittown was selling

⁴² Bennett M. Berger, “The Myth of Suburbia,” in *The End of Innocence: A Suburban Reader*, ed. Charles M. Haar (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1972), 45.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 45-46.

their homes to a particular class of people, while also providing them with safety and homogeneity.

Levittown advertisements centered on the home constituted one part of its appeal to the middle class. While these advertisements specifically focused on the homes included in Levittown developments, they also subtly commented on the type of Americans Levittown was trying to attract in the postwar era. The “Cape Cod” Ad,” published in 1947, is an example of an advertisement used by Levittown. **[Image One]** The main focus of the advertisement is the home, which is large and the focal point for viewers.⁴⁵ This is significant because it exploits the fact that suburbs such as Levittown could provide a single-family home in a brand new housing development to potential buyers. The imagery also alludes to the fact that Levittown homes provided residents with land and individual living space. Desire for space was not a new middle-class concept, and it could be traced back to the early suburbs in the United States. In appealing to the desire for a home, the advertisement highlights Levittown’s role in the development of the middle class in the postwar period.

The advertiser also targeted veterans, as the sale it is referencing was “For Veterans Only.”⁴⁶ Due to the G.I. Bill, many veterans were able to afford Levittown homes, especially with the special pricing. The advertisement obviously attempts to use economics as a selling point when it states that Levittown was “acclaimed nationally as the greatest value in the United States today!”⁴⁷ This shows how Levittown worked to bring former military men into their

⁴⁵ “Cape Cod Ad,” *Levittown History Collection*, 1947, <http://cdm16694.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p15281coll37/id/55>.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

communities, establishing the notion that veterans and their families were the middle class.

Finally, the Cape Cod ad utilized the increased living standards of the time. It does this by mentioning all the amenities that will be included in the home, from the appliances to cabinets.⁴⁸

Image Two is another example of an advertisement that used the home as the selling point. This advertisement comes from the second Levittown in Pennsylvania and showcases the variety of houses that people could purchase in the new development. It also utilizes the marketing strategy that the new Levittown was “The Most Perfectly Planned Community in America.”⁴⁹ While Image One comes from the first Levittown and Image Two from the second, both focus on the Levitts’ desire to sell their homes to veterans coming home from war, which helped their suburbs become the center of the postwar creation of the middle class. They could provide families with an affordable way to buy into the middle-class life that was already equipped with the popular amenities.

While several of the Levittown advertisements focused on the homes and amenities offered to prospective buyers, there were some that centered on the ideal middle-class family, which consisted of a wife who did not work and supported the children at home. The “Halperin Brochure” [**Images Three – Five**] was an extensive advertising brochure published to help promote Levittown and its homes. In **Image Three and Four** it is easy to see that Levittown’s main target audience was families. In Image Three there are several children playing in the street as the mother worked in the yard. In Image Four there is a man holding a woman by the waist

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Levittown, Pa. | Building the Suburban Dream, Accessed September 18, 2017, <http://statemuseumpa.org/levittown/one/f.html>.

and the hand of a young girl who looks excited and seems to be pointing to a Levittown house.⁵⁰ While other advertisements appealed to veterans, this advertisement made it clear that the ideal middle-class family was not complete without a wife in the home and children. It also promoted the nuclear family as a main feature of middle-class life, unlike other living arrangements where multiple generations could be living under one roof.

Despite the use of women, this advertisement also takes advantage of the opportunity to address how veterans received a discount upon buying their house.⁵¹ Both women and men according to this advertisement were integral parts of the middle-class Levittown family. **Image Five** of the brochure addresses “Mr. and Mrs. Homebuyer,” which implies that people buying the homes will be married. It then proceeds to explain the many amenities and layouts of the homes available to people interested in living in Levittown. For example, it attempts to walk readers through each room of the house, and explains how life will be simpler in a Levittown home. The advertisement even makes the claim that Levittown homes “take the drudgery out of housekeeping” simply through their layout.⁵²

This advertisement differed from the earlier advertisements because it focused on the family aspect of suburban life, and clarifies that middle-class families were the target Levittown homeowners. This advertisement also uses storytelling to attract potential buyers. It details an idyllic and simple life in a home that is perfectly made for the veteran and his family. The advertisement even claims that the features in the home were “really built to give lifetime

⁵⁰ “Halperin Sales Brochure,” Accessed September 15, 2017, *Levittowners.com*, 2015.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

satisfaction.”⁵³ Unlike other housing developments, Levittown was the perfect example of how suburbs could sell the convenience of modern, middle-class American life to potential buyers for a cheap and affordable price.

The advertisements during the post-war era centered on selling a comfortable way of life. It was not extravagant, but it was idyllic and helped to frame the suburbs as the ideal place for middle-class families during the period. The middle class was a large section of the American population, and its characteristics and lifestyle became highly desirable during the postwar period. Levittown created the middle class by providing them with housing that was affordable, comfortable, and represented the attainment of a middle-class life.

Race

With the conclusion of World War II, the country had the opportunity to focus on issues at home. One issue that had been growing for decades was racial inequalities, specifically between white Americans and African Americans. The push for civil rights that commenced in the decades following the conclusion of the war not only brought violence and the mistreatment of minority groups into the spotlight, but also resulted in a variety of responses from white Americans across the country. Housing segregation was the norm following the war, which led to separate black and white communities. When African Americans attempted to challenge this segregation in Levittown, they were met with racism.

When it came to issues of race, the people of the suburbs were usually supportive of the actions the government was taking to provide civil rights to African Americans across the country. According to G. Scott Thomas, the people of the suburbs “supported Eisenhower when he sent troops to Little Rock to desegregate its public high school; they applauded Kennedy

⁵³ Ibid.

when he forced the integration of universities in the Deep South; and they agreed with Johnson when he declared that Americans of all races deserved the right to vote.”⁵⁴ Racial inequalities were an issue for the people outside of the suburban bubble, and they appeared to have no place in suburbs of the North, such as Levittown.

In the decades following the war, civil rights issues in America appeared to be regional. It was a problem for the South, and because most suburbs were in the North, the residents could say they supported the plight of African Americans based on morality.⁵⁵ As the issue became prominent in the lives of everyday suburban dwellers, they were forced to face the reality of the racial equality they said they supported. Levittown provides a perfect example of what happened when racial equality came to the doorsteps of suburban residents who were used to their neighborhoods being all-white.

Levittowns did not have African-Americans homeowners in their early years. In fact, the Levitts made it clear that they were not interested in selling their homes to African Americans. This idea of separation was not new in the American housing market. Even as African Americans moved from the rural South to the urban North, there were clear distinctions when it came to neighborhoods. African Americans were excluded from owning the home of their dreams, even in the North. When President Roosevelt signed the Home Owners Loan Corporation into law in 1933, it provided people with a way to save themselves from the growing problem of foreclosure during the Great Depression. This law provided substantial

⁵⁴ G. Scott Thomas, *The United States of Suburbia*, (New York: Prometheus Books, 1998), 50-51.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

funds for the struggling market, but it was a system that would alter the housing market and neighborhoods across the country for decades to come.⁵⁶

To help implement the law, the Home Owners Loan Corporation implemented a system to appraise communities where they would be offering mortgages. This system assigned a letter grade to communities to determine value. While this seemed like a normal and procedural system to help the law be implemented fairly, in reality, “high marks were given to neighborhoods that were homogenous...the lowest grade – assigned the letter D or the color red – went to the neighborhoods that had declined with ‘an undesirable element.’”⁵⁷ Redlined districts were “predominately African-American inner-city communities,” which not only set up African Americans to struggle in an already discriminatory society, but also legitimized the racist beliefs of the country. The belief was that “an influx of African-Americans would devalue a community.”⁵⁸ People became wary of African Americans moving into their communities because they did not want the value of their property to go down. To prevent this scare within their own community, the Levitt brothers from the beginning made clear their rules about minorities in their suburbs.

Before certain regulations were put into place to stop housing discrimination, it was quite easy for the Levitts to make sure that African Americans or other minorities did not buy property in Levittown. Until ruled unenforceable, there was a clause in the Levittown lease that required homebuyers to agree never to sell their homes to non-whites. In 1948, the Supreme Court ruled stipulations regarding race to be unconstitutional, and the Levitts had to take the clause out of the

⁵⁶ Kushner, *Two Families, One Tycoon, and the Fight for Civil Rights in America's Legendary Suburb*, 17.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

lease. Even though they were required to take the clause out of the lease, they had no intention of changing the policy. Bill Levitt claimed that Levittown was not the only suburb to do this, and they would still continue to use their judgment when deciding to whom they would rent or sell.⁵⁹ This meant that they still refused to sell their homes to minority buyers, which angered many civil rights organizations. Levitt and Sons saw backlash from these groups and Kushner claims that, “the price of fame was to single out Levittown as the most notable example” of suburban housing discrimination.⁶⁰ The Levitts did not respond to the outcry against their policies, and the first African-American family to move into a Levittown would not only become national news, but would expose the reality of suburban life during the postwar period.

The development of the Levittown in Pennsylvania brought many families to Bucks County, especially with the growing number of jobs in the area. The second largest steel mill on the East Coast was set to open in the area, and the Levitts knew that “The steelworkers would need homes, and housing these blue-collar veterans was the perfect challenge – and market – for the Levitts.”⁶¹ Bringing their race policies from Long Island, the Levitts planned to create the perfect suburban community, which meant a racially homogeneous one. The Myers, a middle-class and African-American family looking for a place to raise their children, challenged this way of life.

Bill Myers was an African-American man originally from the York, Pennsylvania. He met his wife, Daisy, at the Hampton Institute in Virginia in 1948, where he was a graduate student teaching classes and chief engineer. Even when they first started dating, Bill was excited

⁵⁹ Ibid., 43.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 60.

about the chance to leave the South and move back North, specifically to Pennsylvania where he grew up in mixed neighborhoods with a seemingly equal life to his white neighbors. He wanted that for his family and Daisy was excited about the opportunity to move away from the South and its racial injustice and prejudice. When they decided to get married, they expected that, "They would leave the past behind and find their new home [sic], a freer life...up North."⁶² This idyllic life though was not the reality that the Myers experienced when they finally made their way to Pennsylvania.

In 1950, the Myers family made the move to Pennsylvania, and they were immediately shocked by the real estate they were shown. Despite the fact that Bill had a job as an engineer and had more than enough money saved to buy a home in a nice neighborhood, their real estate agent took them to the poorest parts of town that were predominately occupied by African Americans. They even asked to see other houses in town, but "the agent would just look them in the eye and say nothing else was available."⁶³ This was not the reception that the Myers were expecting when they moved to the North, and "They wanted what everyone else wanted: a good home in a good community. The Myers were in their twenties and ready to begin their life together."⁶⁴ They were eventually able to use Bill's connections in the area to find a home that would not normally sell to African Americans. They knew they would face scrutiny, but they moved in anyway. The Myers regularly dealt with commotion outside of their home, caused by neighbors not happy about an African-American couple moving into their neighborhood. They chose to ignore it and quickly realized that "Just because they were in the North didn't mean they

⁶² Ibid., 22-23.

⁶³ Ibid., 49.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

were safe from racial violence.”⁶⁵ The Myers did not expect this tension when they moved North, and their determination to live comfortable lives that they had earned through hard work lead them to fight for place in the ideal suburban community, Levittown.

Some of the residents of Levittown, Pennsylvania had also noticed the lack of diversity in their community. Bea and Lew Wechsler moved to Levittown drawn by the amenities and community Levittown advertised. When they arrived they marveled at the homes and were excited about, “A bedroom for each family member. A backyard for Biff (family dog). A fireplace open on both sides. And, best of all, thought Bea, a brand-new washing machine!”⁶⁶ As the Wechslers settled in, made friends, and started a seemingly normal life in the suburbs, they noticed that their suburb lacked diversity, or at least no African Americans. It seemed that “No matter how much they enjoyed being pioneers in Levittown, the reality of Levitt’s plan could not escape them: Levittown was whites-only. Or close to it anyway. While Bea and Lew noticed a few families of color – Indian and Mexican – there were no blacks at all.”⁶⁷

As time went on though, maintaining an all-white neighborhood became difficult. By 1957, Bucks County was dealing with a recession that had stalled the housing market, and no one was looking to buy in Levittown at that time. The house next door to the Wechslers had been on the market for two years, and the owner was having no success selling it.⁶⁸ It soon became clear to the owner that the best chance he had of selling his home was to open it to African Americans. While the Wechsler family was nervous in the beginning, “...they had never backed down from

⁶⁵ Ibid., 50.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 62.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 64.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 81.

a fight, and the opportunity to integrate the most iconic suburb in America was too great to resist.”⁶⁹

When the Wechslers met the Myers, they became invested in helping them transition into life in Levittown, but neither family would be prepared for the hostility they would face. On the day that the Myers moved into their ranch-style home on Deepgreen Lane, news traveled quickly across the neighborhood that Levittown has received its first African-American family. By evening a large crowd formed outside of the house that included neighbors, police, and reporters.⁷⁰ The crowd grew louder and seemingly more violent, to the point that the Myers did not feel safe in their own home. The police were also doing nothing to disperse or calm down the crowd, and the scene got to a point on the first night that the Myers decided “...they had had enough – they were not going to remain here one minute longer...they slowly drove out of Dogwood Hollow back to the home in Bloomingdale Gardens they thought they had left behind.”⁷¹ The harassment did not end on the first night, and the Myers started their residence in Levittown trying to survive the scrutiny and racism happening right outside on their front lawn.

The conditions in their new neighborhood eventually got so bad that the Myers family took their case of harassment all the way to court. The state of Pennsylvania sued the Levittowners who were intimidating and taunting the Myers family. The trial demonstrated that the people trying to force the Myers to leave the neighborhood were acting on their racist beliefs. Testimonies in the case made it clear that racism and prejudice were not only in the South, and it took different forms in different regions. It seemed that “In the South they had lynchings, but in

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 90.

⁷¹ Ibid., 92.

Levittown the racism took the shape of a suburban committee with Confederate flags for sale at the local Shop-O-Rama.”⁷² The court ruled in favor of the Myers family, and their harassers were criminally charged for their actions. The ruling also made harassment forbidden by law.⁷³ While the case did not bring an end to the racism of Levittown homeowners, it did show the consequences people faced from acting on the racial prejudice promoted in Levittown.

This one example shows the prejudice that minorities felt during this period, especially in specifically planned communities such as Levittown. This example makes clear the lasting impact of race on a postwar suburb, as well as the way African Americans participated in suburbanization. With a lack of acceptance in growing suburbs following World War II, African Americans had to create their own communities to counteract the racism they found in suburbs such as Levittown.

With the discriminatory housing policies, “redlining,” and racial prejudice, many African Americans soon discovered that if they had any real chance at a suburban life they were going to have to create one of their own. There are a variety of reasons that white Americans continued to hold onto racist beliefs, and they were only made stronger by the common beliefs of the time period. It did not matter if a person was racist or not, the way society was set up during this period made it difficult for people to get past preconceptions that had been perpetuated about African Americans for decades. One of the main reasons was that white Americans associated crime, health problems, and sexual depravity with African Americans.⁷⁴ If African Americans were not allowed to live in the same neighborhoods as white Americans, then there was no

⁷² Ibid., 176.

⁷³ Ibid., 189.

⁷⁴ Andrew Wiese, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century*, 98.

chance of them bringing the problems to their children and the neighborhood. White Americans also had a tendency to relate their fears of African Americans moving into their neighborhoods to economic pressures. They were constantly told by real estate agents and home developers that having African Americans in their neighborhoods would do real damage to their property value, and as homeowners, many Americans did not want anything to impact the value of their home. This is part of why suburban America was not open to the idea of African-American neighbors. They represented a threat that could bring economic ruin to the area.⁷⁵

The other major reason that white Americans were against the idea of African Americans living in their suburbs was because of the threat they posed to their middle- or working-class status. Wiese points out in his book, *Places of Their Own*, that during the postwar period many white Americans were the grandchildren of immigrants, and they benefitted from a system that favored white Americans. They had a better life than their ancestors, and enjoyed the class system American society used. If African Americans moved into middle-class neighborhoods, it threatened not only their superiority, but also the class system itself. Wiese claims that, "As a number of historians have pointed out, suburbanization was closely related to the making of race and class identities in the postwar period."⁷⁶ Suburbs provided many white Americans with the opportunity to unite against the African-American community, which resulted in communities in several parts of the country, both the North and the South, that were not available to African Americans, no matter their economic or social status.

As mentioned earlier, the fears and stereotypes about the African American community led to severe housing problems, supported by measures the federal government put into place. It

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

seemed that, "At a broader level, the 1940s and 1950s witnessed the establishment of a new regime of suburban land use, backed by the power of the local, state, and federal governments and rooted in a vision of metropolitan space in which white communities were seen as normative and African American places were aberrant, threatening, and negatively valued."⁷⁷ While suburbanization was a national trend, it was clear "By the mid-1950's, 'suburbia' had become a spatial metaphor for whiteness itself."⁷⁸ To deal with this segregation, many African Americans created suburbs and communities of their own, out of need, comfort, and safety.

Early black suburbs did not match with the idealized suburb of Levittown. They were what many people would call "slums," an impression solely based on their outward appearance. For many of the people living in the community though, "these places were also suburbs shaped by the experience, aspirations, and income of the black families who made them home."⁷⁹ Despite the possible economic differences, black suburbs did not form because of reasons drastically different than white suburbs. In fact, "Despite differences in the communities where they settled, early black suburbanites moved to suburbs for many of the same reasons as nonblacks."⁸⁰ They were attracted by the potential for work and the creation of social networks. African Americans also bought into the idea of the suburban ideal, even if they were not the ones it was being sold to. "In short, black suburbanites responded to the same social, ideological, and structural forces that encouraged urban decentralization in general."⁸¹

⁷⁷ Ibid., 109.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 68.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid., 69.

Looking to the suburban ideal was a way to fit into the culture of the time period, but African Americans also had their own version of suburban life. Wiese argues that, "Like other Americans, black suburbanites also internalized images of ideal places to live, drawing inspiration not only from the elite-oriented visions of suburban arcadia but from southern history and cultural inclinations they shared with other black migrants."⁸² Black suburbanization combined middle-class and African-American ideals. While creating a community they could turn to and that understood the race struggle in the country, African Americans also valued what many other middle-class Americans valued. They wanted to be homeowners, have gardens, and a family life.⁸³ While middle-class ideals were evident in many of the advertisements of the time period, the lack of diversity shows how ideal suburban life did not include African Americans.

It is clear from any advertisement during this period that unless the producers were selling specifically to African Americans, the advertisements focused around white people and families. When looking specifically at Levittown, it is easy to see that the policy they had originally put into their lease held true in how they advertised their homes to the American public. African Americans were never portrayed as the ideal Levittown homebuyer. Advertisers also knew that if they portrayed an African American couple or family, they would face more criticism than if they stayed with the norm and portrayed white Americans.

The "Halperin Brochure" combines many aspects of suburban life and the expectations for owners of Levittown homes. While this is a resale or rental brochure, it reflects the fact that Levittown homes were meant for white Americans, and this suburb would not cater to African American buyers. On one page of the brochure there is a white woman watering her plants and

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

white children playing in the yard and street.⁸⁴ **[Image Three]** There is no diversity in the photo, which shows that just like the Levitts stipulated in their leases, there were no African American residents. With the overall homogeneity of the photo, the advertisement also tried to convey how Levittown was safe because everyone was white. The brochure overall has a universal appeal, especially with the life and home that it is describing. **Image Five** describes many aspects of home owning that people no matter their race would appreciate, such as a large carport with extra room for the kids to play safely.⁸⁵ This emphasized the fact that African-American families may have wanted the same amenities and life style as the one depicted in the brochure, but it was not marketed towards them.

Two other advertisements also show the lack of diversity in advertising, and how white couples were a common way to sell suburban life in the postwar era. “Kelvinator Advertises the Dream of a Suburban Home, 1944” and “General Electric” were both advertisements that used couples, both young and white, to sell their products and the suburban dream **[Image Six and Seven]**. Image Six shows a happy and smiling couple thinking about the home they will make in the suburbs.⁸⁶ Image Seven also shows a happy couple thinking about their dream home, this time with the man drawing an example of the home in the dirt as they sit on a bench.⁸⁷ Both of these advertisements were used close to the end of the war, and they portray men wearing military uniforms, which indicates that the advertisement was targeted towards military men

⁸⁴ “Halperin Sales Brochure,” Accessed September 15, 2017, *Levittowners.com*, 2015.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ “Kelvinator Advertises the Dream of a Suburban Home, 1944,” In *The Suburb Reader*, ed. Becky M. Nicolaides and Andrew Wiese, (New York: Routledge, 2006), 260.

⁸⁷ Levittown, Pa. | Building the Suburban Dream, Accessed September 18, 2017, <http://statemuseumpa.org/levittown/one/b.html>.

returning from war and their families. Even though black vets were able to get loans through federal programs, they would not be allowed to use them in white suburbs. The women beside each of the men are well dressed and white, trying to portray their middle-class status.⁸⁸

According to these advertisements, the ideal American couple was white with a military husband hoping to buy a safe and comfortable house in the suburbs. The association of African Americans with crime and low property values drove advertisers to cater to the white middle class. They were the people who could participate in the new housing market, and trying to cater to African Americans could not only hurt their business, but would be economically disadvantageous.

Each of the advertisements from this time period show a lack of representation, and use plain, white Americans to sell the suburban life. The people in the advertisements also lacked any obvious ethnic background. In previous periods, ethnic relationships and connections played a major role in housing and settlement. With suburban development, ethnicity was pushed aside for the being "white." The grandchildren of immigrants were buying into the idea of American life in the suburbs, and being middle class meant giving up ethnic identities to fit into the larger accepted community of white Americans.⁸⁹ Lack of diversity even among white Americans created a polarized environment for African Americans, who were competing against an advertised image that combatted any racial or ethnic diversity.

The lack of representation in these advertisements not only shows who was being sold a life in Levittown, but is also indicative of the struggle African Americans would face when trying to participate in the postwar suburbanization of the United States. To protect themselves

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Andrew Wiese, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century*, 99.

from the potential social and economic problems that reportedly came with African Americans, many white Americans were drawn to suburbs like Levittown, which could promise a life in a safe and homogenous community. When a family such as the Myers moved into Levittown, it not only threatened the norms of the time, but to the white residents, it threatened the idyllic life they had been promised by the Levitts.

Women/Gender

While both class and race were major factors in the development of Levittown, gender also played a role, especially in terms of the roles of women. Women had the opportunity to return to the home sphere following the end of the war, and in many cases they would move to the suburbs with their husband and children. The home during this period was known as the woman's space, and many women worked hard to create the perfect space for her family. This was specifically portrayed in advertisements from the time, and there were some that the Levitts directed specifically at women. Many women, though, did not follow this ideal because they were accustomed to participating in the workforce.

With men returning home from World War II, there was an opportunity for women to return to the domestic space and leave the workforce. Many women had entered the workforce to make up for the men away at war, but with the men returning home, many women felt the pressure to leave their jobs so the men could reestablish themselves as the breadwinner and providers for America's growing families. With men returning home, it was also an opportunity for families to enter center stage once again, and the American population grew rapidly. Because of these factors, women felt the pressure to return to the home, especially with the growth of the suburbs. As Baxandell and Ewen explain, "most women did not seek employment outside of the home, for reasons stemming from a complex interaction of the ideology, economics, and culture

permeating the suburban ideal.”⁹⁰ This lack of acceptance in the workforce not only hurt women’s chances of being treated equally for their work, but also suggested that women played a key role in the creation of the middle-class suburban ideal.

The ideal life for a housewife during the postwar period came from historical expectations and women’s role in the family. While many families outside of the middle class did not have the opportunity to live this way, “Since the nineteenth century, the ideal middle-class family consisted of a stay at home wife and bread winning husband, whose wife, children, and home reflected his status.”⁹¹ This permeated popular culture, and made families who could not conform to this idea feel unworthy. Advertisements and other forms of communication during the period not only pushed certain expectations on the middle-class suburban woman, but also told her that all of her needs in the home were met by the suburban lifestyle. These pressures produced tension around women’s roles that gradually emerged.

Bill Levitt used many tactics to appeal to women, knowing that he could pull them into the suburban life of Levittown. Advertisements dealing with kitchen amenities were targeted directly towards women, and Levitt held home decorating contests for prize money.⁹² Women during this period heard consistent messages about what life was like in the suburbs, and it not only included staying at home, but making the home into the perfect place for a family.

⁹⁰ Rosalyn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen, "Picture Windows: The Changing Role of Women in the Suburbs, 1945-2000," *Long Island Historical Journal* 3, no. 1 (1990): 92.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid., 93.

According to Baxandell and Ewen, "Mrs. Suburbanite made her house shine, her work ethic a particular blend of efficiency and relaxation."⁹³

Women were not only in control of the home and its appearance, but they were also tasked with birthing and rearing children. During the postwar period, the United States experienced an increase in births, as men returned from war and started the families they could not before. In Levittown specifically, the women were focused on childrearing and birth. Pregnancy was the look of Levittown and "The major product of Levittown was its children. Young children, mainly two years apart...they bound mother's lives together."⁹⁴ Women in suburbs such as Levittown were connected by their ability and goal of child rearing. Unlike any other housing development or neighborhood, suburbs during this period could be considered the first major American environment that was built for the production and raising of children. Women were an integral part of the growth of the community in suburbs as well, as they became heavily involved in developing the education systems and community events.⁹⁵ The women of Levittown played their role as middle-class mother and wife quite well, and followed the trends they observed in their communities and in the media.

The home was a central and driving force for women during the postwar period. Even the style and construction of suburban homes catered to a specific type of suburbanite. In many cases, "The architectural layouts of the homes as well as the neighborhoods themselves were designed for this form of nuclear family life and thus tended to exclude the interests and

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

lifestyles of people not living in such arrangements.”⁹⁶ Suburbs were an opportunity not only to create an ideal life, but to promote that life to the community and the country. Unlike any period before, the postwar period saw the growth of the home as showcase, where mainly women could turn their homes into the perfect scene of nuclear family life and domesticity.⁹⁷ While it may have created a certain creative outlet for some suburban women, it also reinforced expectations for the perfect home.

Women worked hard to create a home they could display, and they would even start to blend in with their homes. Women became one with their home spaces because domesticity fused the woman and her home. In suburbs, women would redecorate their homes to make them distinctive, but they also made sure not to stray too far away from what was portrayed as the ideal in middle-class magazines and publications.⁹⁸ Women would create spaces that both catered to the family and reflected the abilities of the woman as a homemaker. This not only allowed them to express their own individuality, but also to fit into the parameters set by the culture at the time. Without these parameters, women and gender expectations would not have played as substantial of a role in postwar suburbs as they did.

It was also not only the advertisements and publications that contributed to the growth of women’s role in the family and home. The growth of television and the family sitcom helped to reinforce nuclear family life, and turn the home into a theatrical space where women and their families put on a show for visitors and their community. With the growth of television during

⁹⁶ Lynn Spigel, “From Theatre to Space Ship: Metaphors of Suburban Domesticity in postwar America,” In *Visions of Suburbia*, ed. Roger Silverstone, 217-239 (London: Routledge, 1997), 219.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 221.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

this period, people had the opportunity to not only see programming from around the country, but they were also exposed to family-centered situation comedies that appealed to the middle class of the time. Sitcoms were most successful at highlighting “the performative nature of middle-class life on a weekly basis...”⁹⁹ Examples such as *I Love Lucy* and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* all used the middle-class family and their home as a space for theatrics and entertainment.¹⁰⁰ This means that not only did women in suburbs face certain expectations, but they also experienced them everyday through advertisements and the media.

Women were stuck in the home during this period, and not only because that was their designated sphere. Many women managed the home because her husband left the home in her charge when he went to work. Jennifer Kalish describes suburban men during this period as “Too tired from his long commute when he did come home.” Thus, “the suburban man abdicated his responsibilities for providing his wife with an interesting social life and forced this responsibility on his wife.”¹⁰¹ While this may have provided women with an opportunity to gain some control of their own lives, it greatly restricted their choices. The suburban sphere was one women could not easily escape from, and they were limited to making the home into a space they could call their own. With the immense focus on the nuclear family, it even limited the ability of women to create a larger community. According to Kalish, for many women, “...suburban social life was restricted to people from the neighborhood block.”¹⁰² This not only separated women from other

⁹⁹ Ibid., 221-222

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Jennifer Kalish, “Spouse-Devouring Black Widows and Their Neutered Mates: Postwar Suburbanization. A Battle Over Domestic Space,” *UCLA Historical Journal* 14, (1994): 141.

¹⁰² Ibid.

people, but also reinforced the idea that a suburban woman should be focused on her family and the home she was tasked with creating for it.

Despite expectations, many suburban women did not fit into the ideal, and the reality was much more complicated. The ideal suburban woman was a mother who stayed at home to take care of the family and create the perfect domestic space, which included a well kept home and a sense of stability. According to Marilyn Rubin, "After all, ask the mythmakers, how can a married woman living in suburbia move into the (paid) labor force when she already has the fulltime job of (unpaid) family chauffeur?"¹⁰³ The myth of the ideal suburban housewife may have played out in some homes during the postwar era, but for many that lifestyle was not as feasible as some may have wanted to believe.

Despite the persistent image of the woman in the home, the participation of women in the workforce was not uncommon even before World War II. Women worked in the home before the industrial revolution when men and women shared agrarian labor. The industrial revolution then separated men and women's work and took men out of the home. Women were always there as a source of cheap labor, and were willing to do work men did not want to do or to stand in for men if they were away at war. As the country urbanized, many single women participated in the workforce, and "at the end of the nineteenth century, 85 percent of working women were single."¹⁰⁴ After World War II, women still had opportunities to participate in the workforce, even when they moved out to the suburbs.

During the postwar period, suburban areas saw a major increase in industry and jobs. It was this growth of industry in the suburbs that provided women with the opportunity to continue

¹⁰³ Marilyn Rubin, "Debunking the Myth: Working Women in Suburbia," 79.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

to work, while also staying close to their families.¹⁰⁵ While proximity was a major factor, so was the economic opportunity. According to Stephanie Coontz, "Rising real wages in women's industries increased the costs of staying home and provided new incentives for married women to work."¹⁰⁶ While women were expected to take care of their families and the home, in many instances married families also needed additional income. It was even the case that "Ironically, the young women who chose early marriage, domesticity, and increased fertility in the postwar years...contributed both to the growing demand for married women in the labor market and eventually its supply."¹⁰⁷ While the beliefs of the time celebrated the idea that the place for women was in the home, in many cases it was not the reality suburban families lived on a daily basis.

David Kushner provides examples of women who lived in Levittown, Pennsylvania and did not adhere to the era's expectations for housewives. Both Daisy Myers and Bea Wechsler were dedicated and involved mothers who helped to keep their families afloat by working outside of the home and participating in their communities. Daisy Myers was an educated woman who had worked and went to school prior to being married. Even when she moved to Pennsylvania with her husband she continued to stay involved in her community. When they first moved, she even took classes at Temple University.¹⁰⁸ She was not a woman to stay at home and tend to her children. She worked hard and this was reflected in her family's fight for justice when

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 82.

¹⁰⁶ Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: BasicBooks, 1992), 161.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Kushner, *Levittown: Two Families, One Tycoon, and the Fight for Civil Rights in America's Legendary Suburb*, 79.

they moved to Levittown. Bea Wechsler was also a dedicated mother, but she participated in the workforce just like her husband. During the time when the Myers were moving into Levittown, Bea was working as a bookkeeper.¹⁰⁹ These women were both members of the Levittown community, and experienced life as a woman in the suburbs. Despite this, they both responded to economic need and the desire for educational attainment, which meant they were doing more than tending to their homes and reproducing.

Women in suburbia during the postwar period had certain expectations in terms of being a mother, homemaker, and middle-class resident of Levittown. Even though many women broke with expectations to provide for their families, there were still advertisements promoting the suburban ideal for a woman. These advertisements, specifically in Levittown, portrayed women as enjoying a life in the home, especially with the modern conveniences now available in the kitchen and around the house. The Levitts knew that they could use women in their advertisements to not only sell their homes, but to attract certain types of people to live in their communities.

The “Halperin Brochure” has multiple examples of how women were expected to participate in suburban life. On page one of the brochure, there is a woman out in the yard watering her plants while children of all ages play in the yard and the street.¹¹⁰ **[Image Three]** The woman looks content and unconcerned with life. The children in the advertisement are playing in the street, which alludes to the fact that Levittown was a safe neighborhood where children could play and mothers would not have to worry about their safety. The imagery also overtly comments on the connection between the mother and children. No men are shown doing

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 89.

¹¹⁰ “Halperin Sales Brochure,” Accessed September 15, 2017, *Levittowners.com*, 2015.

housework or childcare, which furthers the idea of Levittown promoting women in the home and men at work. This page of the advertisement also has a caption that reads, "Look through these pages for the modern answer to your housing problem."¹¹¹ This caption alludes to the fact that people were looking to raise their families in a dependable and safe community. Women played a role in which they were needed to not only raise the children, but to create the suburban ideal with the family at the center.

Another page of the brochure shows a family pointing towards one of the Levittown houses. **[Image Four]** The man is in between his wife and young daughter. Both the mother and daughter look excited about the possibility of living in Levittown, and the man has his arm around his wife and is holding the hand of his daughter.¹¹² This small example of women used in advertising is just a reminder that women were an essential part of suburban life, and they could help to reinforce the idea as a center of Levittown life. When looking at Image Three and Image Four's portrayal of women, there were similarities that the two women share. Both women are wearing nice dresses for the time period, which reinforces femininity, and the desire for women and men to have separate and distinct qualities. Despite these clear gender expectations, both the man and women portrayed look content, as if they all are excited about the reality of a life in Levittown.¹¹³

The brochure also appealed to women when it provided descriptions of the amenities offered in the Levittown homes. **[Image Five]** The housing descriptions had references to a growing family. The brochure assumed that people who would be moving into the Levittown

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

would have or want to have a family. This can be seen when the brochure is talking about the extra room in the house and it says, "...or as an extra bedroom for your growing family."¹¹⁴ This reference to the family is not only trying to appeal to people looking for a comfortable, safe life, but it also tries to emphasize the fact that child rearing was a major aspect of suburban life.

Women thus had to be able to produce and raise children, which limited their ability to participate in activities outside of the home. Advertisements used this idea of women as mothers, but they also emphasized the fact that women were also homemakers, especially in the postwar period.

Bill Levitt then paired with General Electric to create a kitchen advertisement about the modern appliances included in the Levittown homes. While it is an advertisement about appliances in the home, it is easy to see that it was specifically targeted towards women, who would be spending most of their time in the kitchen. **[Image Eight]** According to the advertisement, "When a woman goes house-hunting, the place she heads for *first* is the kitchen."¹¹⁵ Bill Levitt used the advertisement to promote the idea that the kitchen is the place women are supposed to be and he even claims that the kitchen captivates women.¹¹⁶ The advertisement also says that Levitt believes a modern kitchen should help a woman because it is "one that – paradoxically – she spends less time in...one that does her tasks so efficiently that she has extra hours each day for her friends, family, or hobbies."¹¹⁷ According to this advertisement, a woman's place is in the home and it also assumes that women do not work

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Levittown, Pa. | Building the Suburban Dream, Accessed September 18, 2017, <http://statemuseumpa.org/levittown/three/kitchen.html>.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

outside of the home. The bottom of the advertisement shows different examples of a woman's duties in the home and how simple they were since she had the great General Electric kitchen. One example would be a drawing of a smiling woman putting clothes into the washer. According to the advertisement, "wash day is fun day with this G.E. Washer-Dryer."¹¹⁸ Not only does the woman look content doing this work, she is also wearing a dress with her hair and makeup done. This particular advertisement uses the idea of women's role in the home to sell kitchen appliances to Levittown homeowners and to reinforce both gender roles and ideals of femininity.

The advertisements discussed all portray women and their role in the suburbs in a specific way. All the women are feminine, middle class, and happy to participate in the suburban life both as mothers and homemakers. What these advertisements do not take into account though are the various roles women played in and out of the home during the postwar period. Many women, despite cultural and social expectations, stayed in the workforce to help achieve the middle-class suburban life that Levittown sold. The lack of choice and strict expectations perpetuated by these advertisements also help to lay the groundwork for the work of activists such as Betty Friedan and the emergence of the feminist movement during the 1960s and 1970s. While women were presented with clear expectations for being a resident of a Levittown community, the representations in advertisements did not always match the reality of life for suburban women.

Conclusion

Following World War II, the United States experienced a major shift culturally and physically from urban to suburban living. As veterans came home from war, they not only needed a place to live and work, but also a place to raise children and start a family. With a growing population following the war, it was clear that the lack of housing due to the depression

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

and war was not going to be sufficient to take care of the population. Companies such as Levitt and Sons responded to this need, and used their developments to promote suburban homes with a specific way of life attached.

The actions the Levitt family took in creating their Levittowns were indicative of the culture surrounding suburbs at the time. They were not only responding to the prevailing beliefs of the period, but were also assisting in crafting those ideals into the norm. In regards to class, middle-class families became the focal point of suburban culture, and Levittown actually helped move residents into the middle class. Along with their development of suburban communities in the North, the Levitts racist housing policies contributed to the creation of African American suburbs and furthered the racial segregation initiated by unfair housing and real estate practices. Women also lived with certain expectations if they participated in the suburban lifestyle, and in some cases would break away from those expectations for economic reasons.

Levittown was not only a cultural phenomenon, but it also helped to shape suburban expectations that would endure long after the postwar period. Advertisements from the time period help to show the ideals that prevailed. With a focus on modern housing, white families, and women tied to the home, advertisements used the suburbs to sell products and lifestyles. Advertisements also helped suburbs such as Levittowns promote the idea that suburban life could protect white, middle-class American families from the turmoil of the social and cultural change during this period.

Class, race, and gender ideals came together in the suburbs, and created a distinct suburban identity. Each played its own role in the growth of suburbs during the postwar period, and their connections to one another clearly stipulated what it meant to be a part of the suburban development during the latter half of the twentieth century. For example, women felt pressure to

stay at home, but those women were also supposed to be white and feminine, characteristics that reflected their middle-class status. In Levittown and its advertisements, class, race, and gender came together and were integral parts of the suburban identity that would prevail throughout the twentieth century and is still powerful in American culture today.

Appendix

Image One

**'52 A MONTH,
FOR VETERANS ONLY!**

- Four rooms, plus bath, plus a stairway to a large open attic. Acclaimed nationally as the greatest value in the United States today!
- Youngstown all-steel kitchen cabinets, including the Kitchen-Aid, Bendix Automatic laundry, General Electric refrigerator, Hooper electric range, Venetian blinds throughout.
- Concealed hot-water radiant heating—the first known in the industry. Solid copper for both plumbing and heating. Completely insulated in Cellulose.

GROUNDS 60 BY 100 ALL LANDSCAPED

Full price for everything, \$12,800. Cash required \$500. Monthly carrying charges, \$32, for taxes, water, insurance, interest, and mortgage reduction.

- The Exhibit Home is open every day from 10 A.M. to 8 P.M. Drive out Old Country Road about a mile east of the race track. You can't miss it.

Only a limited number are being built so everything's on a first-come-first-served basis. Occupancy in 60 days to veterans only.

Levitt & Sons
INCORPORATED

EXECUTIVE OFFICE - MANHATTAN - LONG ISLAND

Image Two

THE PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER, SUNDAY MORNING, DECEMBER 3, 1933

1 3 7 1

The Country Chatter

Model—274,000 • Estimated 1934 of \$20

Room	Size	Area
Living Room	12' x 12'	144
Kitchen	10' x 10'	100
Bath	5' x 7'	35

The Budgeter

Model—274,000 • Estimated 1934 of \$20

Room	Size	Area
Living Room	12' x 12'	144
Kitchen	10' x 10'	100
Bath	5' x 7'	35

SPECIAL SPECIFICATIONS:

The following are features in this house:
 • Living room with fireplace
 • Kitchen with built-in stove
 • Bath with built-in tub
 • Front porch with steps
 • Back porch with steps
 • Full basement with stairs
 • Full kitchen with built-in stove
 • Full bathroom with built-in tub
 • Full living room with fireplace
 • Full front porch with steps
 • Full back porch with steps

SPECIAL NOTE:

See the Country Chatter house in the Levittown model home. This is the only house in the Levittown model home that has a full basement with stairs.

The Levittowner

Model—274,000 • Estimated 1934 of \$20

Room	Size	Area
Living Room	12' x 12'	144
Kitchen	10' x 10'	100
Bath	5' x 7'	35

SPECIAL SPECIFICATIONS:

The following are features in this house:
 • Living room with fireplace
 • Kitchen with built-in stove
 • Bath with built-in tub
 • Front porch with steps
 • Back porch with steps

IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD:

Levittown, Pennsylvania
 • Levittown, Pennsylvania
 • Levittown, Pennsylvania

IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD:

Levittown, Pennsylvania
 • Levittown, Pennsylvania
 • Levittown, Pennsylvania

IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD:

Levittown, Pennsylvania
 • Levittown, Pennsylvania
 • Levittown, Pennsylvania

THE MOST PERFECTLY PLANNED COMMUNITY IN AMERICA!

Levittown

PENNSYLVANIA

For families, picturesque Levittown is a new Levittown is rising. All the conveniences, all the excitement, all the talent of the world's greatest community builders—Levitt and Sons, Inc.—have been mobilized to make it the home town in the United States!

• Everything that made Levittown, Long Island, internationally famous will be here—but much better. Swimming pools, athletic fields, baseball diamonds (for the Big Boys and Little Leaguers), playgrounds, the town community hall—have all been carefully located.

• Road layouts have been planned so that no child misses a main road to reach school. Wide, packed boulevards surround the town to make every house easy to reach. Every street system has been laid out to make sense. For instance, Rittenhouse Lane (and any road beginning with "R") is in the Rittenhouse section.

• Small neighborhood shopping centers will be located within walking distance of every house. A vast, almost mile-long main shopping center will be located on Rittenhouse Pike (Route 10). Large

shopping areas will be dedicated without charge to all Levittowners. In consultation with the proper authorities ground has been set aside for elementary, junior high, and high schools.

• A new station—Levittown—will be built on the main line of the Pennsylvania Railroad. Fast connecting trains will make the ride to Broad Street, Philadelphia, in little more than half an hour.

• In this advertisement you see pictures of the houses to be built, but you can see the house Levittowners at the Exhibit Center on Route 10. Go into the Display Building and see everything—every set, every bath, even last line of equipment—that goes into their construction.

• Just remember that every house, every road, every facility has been planned and planned and planned. This is NOT "deluxe housing." This is a great many of Levittown's residents may care their brains to believe in it, but Levittown is permanent real. Good willing, will grow and live as long after the word "deluxe" is forgotten!

HOW TO REACH LEVITTOWN

By car from Philadelphia, New York, and Washington. Levittown is located on Route 10, 10 miles N. of Philadelphia, 10 miles S. of New York, 10 miles W. of Washington. This is the only road to Levittown, and it is the only road to Levittown.

By car from New York. Take the New York and Pennsylvania Turnpike, take off at Route 10 (Levittown Pike). Levittown is located 10 miles N. of New York.

By car from Washington. Take the New York and Pennsylvania Turnpike, take off at Route 10 (Levittown Pike). Levittown is located 10 miles S. of Washington.

Levitt & Sons

INCORPORATED

BRISTOL PIKE • LEVITTOWN, PA. • Telephone BRISTOL 614

Image Three



“Halperin Sales Brochure.” Accessed September 15, 2017. *Levittowners.com*, 2015.

Image Four

"The smartest move
of our lives -- to..."

*resales
rentals*

**Vets—
ONLY 2%
DOWN**

Levittown Pa.
The most perfectly planned
community in America

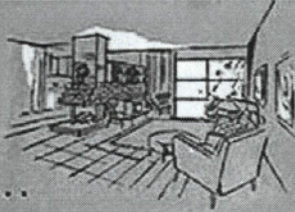


J. HALPERIN & COMPANY
OF PENNSYLVANIA
315 Levittown Shopping Center, Levittown, Pa. Windsor 6-7500
Levittown's Oldest and Most Dependable Real Estate Office



"Halperin Sales Brochure." Accessed September 15, 2017. *Levittowners.com*, 2015.

Image Five




To you Mr. and Mrs. Homebuyer . . .
first things come first, and the first thing you want to know is — *"Is This House a Good Buy."*

Both of you will be interested in such solid, plus values as:

- the beauty of a well-established, attractively landscaped lawn
- the oversized plots of land—no neighbors breathing down your neck
- the fact that water, sewers and sidewalks are all in and all paid for
- the York-Shipley oil-fired radiant heating system, thermostatically controlled
- the durable, well styled exteriors and the asphalt shingle roofs
- the over-sized garage, with easy-opening, overhead door, or the carport which adds more sheltered play area for the children.
- 100% insulation that stretches your heating dollars
- the twin-glide, sliding aluminum windows
- the outdoor terrace for warm-weather dining and family recreation, and perhaps such valuable "extras" as storm sash, screens and combination doors . . . *plus* the many other features that tell you *"this house was really built to give lifetime satisfaction."*

More for you . . . Mr. and Mrs. Homebuyer . . .
any home you select in Levittown will give you the comforts and conveniences that take the drudgery out of housekeeping.


KITCHENS planned for easy, everyday living . . . huge kitchen sinks of stainless steel or porcelain . . . quick-cleaning asphalt tile floors . . . Tracy all-steel kitchen cabinets . . . smooth, modern interiors . . . spacious eating areas . . . G.E. electric ranges . . . electric automatic clothes washers . . . electric kitchen ventilating fans . . . and many more step-saving, time-saving arrangements.



LIVING QUARTERS designed with a thought to your furniture arrangements . . . vibrant, decorator colors on attractive, washable walls . . . log burning fireplaces in most homes . . . interior flush doors that fit right and look right . . . rear living rooms that overlook the outdoor terrace areas or traditional front living rooms and terraces, too.

BEDROOM-BATHROOM AREAS away from the living-dining space to give you privacy and ready access . . . big walk-in wardrobes in all bedrooms . . . cross ventilation and more than average window space to insure all-weather sleeping comfort . . . many models have two complete bathrooms, and all homes have colored bathroom fixtures with showers above tubs.

. . . and That EXTRA ROOM . . . you'll treasure it for many reasons . . . perhaps as a "family room" for TV viewing, perhaps as a playroom for the children. Or you may use it for informal social evenings . . . for overnight guests . . . or as an extra bedroom for your growing family.



"Halperin Sales Brochure." Accessed September 15, 2017. Levittowners.com, 2015.

Image Seven



It's a promise!

Jim's going away tomorrow... and there will be long, lonely days before he comes back.

But that little home sketched there in the sand is a symbol of faith and hope and courage. It's a promise, too. A promise of gloriously happy days to come... when Victory is won.

Victory Homes of tomorrow will make up in part at least for all the sacrifices of today... and that's our promise!

They will have better living built in... electrical living with new comforts, new conveniences, new economies to make every day an adventure in happiness.

Plan for your Victory Home now... the sure way is to buy War Bonds. Every Bond you buy is an investment in your future happiness and security... every dollar you put into Bonds helps bring our boys back sooner—and safer. Buy another Bond today.

The General Electric Consumers Institute at Bridgeport, Conn., is devoted to research on wartime home problems such as Nutrition • Food Preparation Food Preservation • Appliances Care Appliances Repair • Laundry • Home Heating and Air Conditioning. Helpful booklets are available from your G-E Appliances Dealer, or General Electric Consumers Institute, Dept. L-5-1.

APPLIANCE AND MECHANICAL DEPARTMENT, BRIDGEPORT, CONN.

GENERAL ELECTRIC

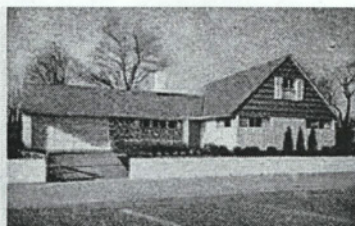


There is no Frasier Road and the Stars were Franklin, Dorothy, Dorothy, Dorothy and E.E.S. On Sunday night there is the "Star of Chance" and N.E.C. See newspapers for show, times.

Image Eight

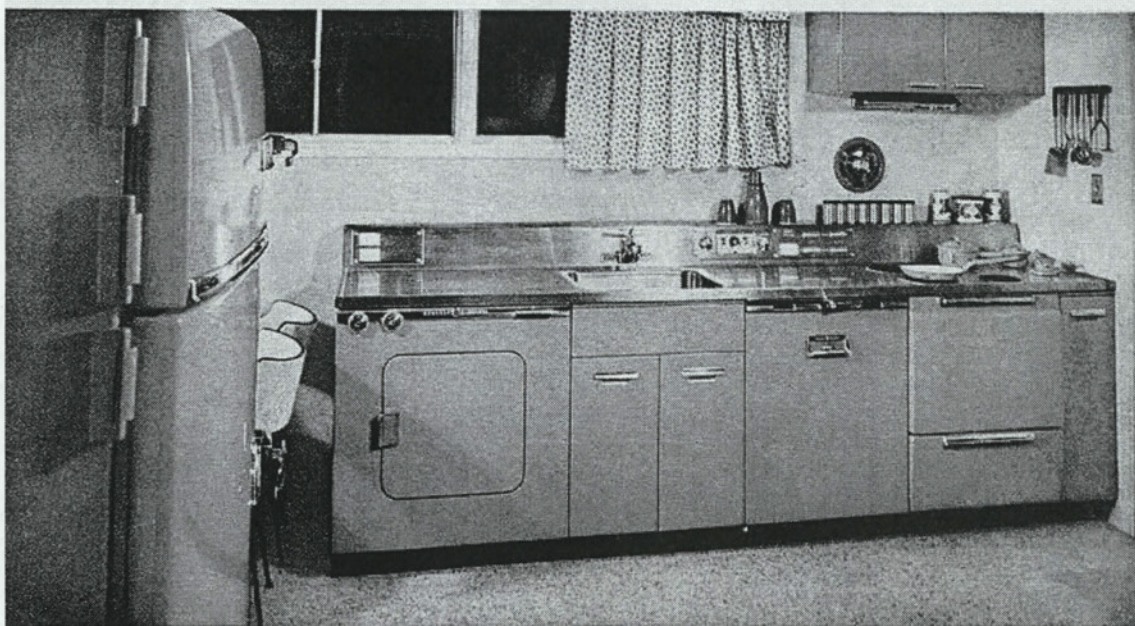


This is town-builder Bill Levitt, and area map of Levittown, Pa. When completed, this new community (between Philadelphia and Trenton) will house 70,000; contain 17,000 dwellings . . . with schools, churches, shopping centers and playgrounds—all pre-planned.



\$100 a month covers all taxes, interest, insurance and amortization for this beautiful new "Country Clubber" Levittown home. Complete price: \$17,500. Veterans pay \$1000 down; non-veterans \$2600. Included at no extra cost: new 9½-foot wonder kitchen by G.E., below.

Town-builder LEVITT previews the new 9½-foot wonder kitchen by General Electric



When a woman goes house-hunting, the place she usually heads for first is the kitchen. This is where she spends so much of her day. This is where she's most likely to fall in love with the house, or reject it.

A man who fully realizes the import of this is the world's largest developer, William Levitt. He believes not only in a kitchen that captivates women at first sight, but one that—paradoxically—she spends less time in . . . one that does her tasks so

efficiently that she has extra hours each day for her family, friends or hobbies.

What you see here is the final design of the built-in custom kitchen-laudry center that both Levitt and General Electric agree offers today's woman more than any other conceived during the past quarter-century. (Mr. Levitt's association with General Electric goes back to 1939, the year G-E Refrigerators were first installed in his unique houses.)

The General Electric Kitchen Center will be in-

stalled in Mr. Levitt's finest Levittown, Pa. homes, and it will also be made available all over America, through local builders, G-E distributors and G-E dealers. In the words of one woman enthusiast, "It is the most magnificent, yet most sensible work-saver, space-saver and time-saver ever!"

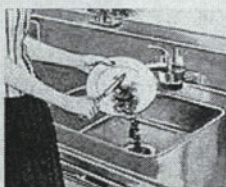
General Electric Company, Appliance Park, Louisville 1, Kentucky.

GENERAL ELECTRIC

Automatic G-E Kitchen Center cooks food . . . flushes away food waste . . . washes dishes . . . even cleans and dries clothes!



Big, wide 21-inch oven . . . push-button controls . . . automatic even timer, bake and broil units of range are fully enclosed. No open coils.



No more garbage pail. Wonderful General Electric Disposall® shreds food scraps (peels, coffee grounds, bones) in a twinkling.



Dishwasher makes short work of a daily chore. Messy dishes are never in sight. Washes and dries a full day's supply at once.



Wash day is fun day with this G-E Washer-Dryer. In go the dirty clothes . . . and out they come, cottons ready for ironing; synthetics ready to wear!



Refrigerator with Revolving Shelves that put all foods at fingertips is standard equipment in Levittown "Country Clubber" kitchens.

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